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## **9. FORESTS: Colorado Gov. Ritter seeks state process for roadless areas**

**Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor**

Expressing doubts about how future court decisions will guide federal forest management practices, Colorado's Gov. Bill Ritter (D) yesterday asked the federal government for an "insurance policy" to protect Colorado's 4.1 million acres of forested roadless areas from development.

While generally endorsing a petition previously sent by ex-Gov. Bill Owens (R) last November, Ritter asked for a "state-specific" rulemaking and four modifications to the plan endorsed by his predecessor.

Specifically, Ritter requested:

- Interim protection for Colorado's roadless areas during the federal review process.
- Cooperating agency status for the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Division of Wildlife (DOW) on any proposed activity within the roadless areas.
- Returning the North Fork coal areas in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests to the roadless-area inventory. However, limited exceptions could be made that allow temporary roads and other activities associated with coal exploration and development.
- That the state DNR and DOW participate in wildlife and habitat reviews associated with potential expansion of recreational ski areas within roadless areas.

Ritter said he supports the protections provided by the federal government's original 2001 roadless rule. A recent court ruling in the case *Lockyer v. U.S. Department of Agriculture* reinstated the 2001 rule and its roadless protections. However, Ritter said he is concerned that future court decisions could eliminate the 2001 protections, citing the federal government's appeal of Magistrate Judge Elizabeth LaPorte's ruling (*see story above*).

"The 2006 petition, as modified by this letter, recognizes Colorado's commitment to protecting our invaluable wild places and at the same time allowing for limited activity where unique circumstances exist," Ritter wrote. "This issue is extremely important to Colorado's hunters, anglers and citizens in general. With the modifications set forth in this letter, I look forward to working with you to promulgate a Colorado Rule which will protect Colorado's roadless areas."

However, the Natural Resources Defense Council criticized the Colorado petition as likely to wipe out protections for approximately 300,000 acres of Colorado wildlands, while weakening protections for the remaining 4.1 million roadless acres in Colorado.

"Only a small percentage of our national forests remain roadless and wild. In Colorado, they are some of the best areas for wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation. We must preserve them for future generations," said Amy Mall, NRDC's campaign director. "This petition completely removes protection for roadless portions of ski areas -- an unjustifiable giveaway since, even under the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule, ski areas can build new runs and lifts. They just can't build new roads in roadless areas for other development," she said.

"Coloradans overwhelmingly support the protections of the 2001 roadless rule. During consideration of the rule, 92 percent of public comments from Colorado supported the complete protection of all roadless areas," said Jonathan Proctor, regional representative for Defenders of Wildlife. "The new petition is a step in the wrong direction."